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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NIAMEY 000115

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SUBJECT: NIGER: TUAREG MINISTER'S VIEWS ON CURRENT EVENTS

Classified By: Mark Wentling, USAID, reasons, 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) In a January 28 meeting with the Embassy Development Coordinator, Environment Minister Mohamed Akotey offered the following observations on recent developments.

12. (C) Akotey said that it is definitely NOT the MNJ which is laying mines in urban areas. He said that "they" are laying mines. The "they" are those within the government/military who wish to discredit the MNJ and create an anti-Tuareg backlash. The "they" were also those who have an interest in prolonging the conflict. Akotey had not experienced or did he know of any backlash against Tuaregs, but warned that there are some who would like to see this happen.

13. (C) A big danger is that not only is the public not informed of what is happening in the North, but key members of the GON also do not know what is happening there. Ministers and the President do not have the information on the events in the north they need to make decisions. Even within the military, information is not shared well.

14. (C) The political split within the ruling MNSD party represents as much, if not more, of a danger to Niger than the rebellion. This split is not unrelated to the rebellion, especially as the political split effects actual and potential splits within the military. These splits involve Djerma vs. Hausa and the resentment of the latter about the former having always controlled the military. Akotey said 80 percent of the army was Djerma but they are only 20 percent of the population. (FYI: While Akotey cast the split in ethnic terms, others describe it in regional terms, i.e. east (Hausa) versus west (Djerma). The split within the MNSD is largely between President Tandja, who is from the east, and former Prime Minister Amadou, who is from the west.) The splits also relate to previous problems in the military (e.g. the Diffa mutiny and the Pele affair) and the split between those who were pro-General Bare and those who were not. He said the pro-Bare elements tend to side with the MNJ. Also, the amnesty granted in the constitution for those involved in the Bare-coup still rankles many, as some of the military officers involved are still on active duty.

15. (C) The military and "Arabs" are the big drug traffickers in the North. They collaborate with Algerians, some Maliens and others to send drugs north to Europe and to Egypt. It is not in the interest of military officers involved to see the conflict in the North end soon. He does not think the MNJ is involved in drug trade. He said an illiterate guide for drug traffickers could make 10 million FCFA (about \$20,000) per trip. He did not think that there was any more smuggling of cigarettes. He fears the big money that can be made in the drug trade will spoil everything in the North.

¶16. (C) Akotey fears that with the drug trade and increased banditry that a prolonged conflict could result in the formation of numerous armed bands vying for territory and control of trade routes. He said that the number and diversity of Tuareg tribes lends itself to such a situation.

¶17. (C) The recently created FPLN (a group apparently comprised of Djerma which claims to have a military wing) was nothing more than a poorly managed website.

¶18. (C) The families of the seven people ("the Rharous group") assassinated by the military on December 10 have given President Tandja a few weeks to hand over the people involved in this crime before taking matters into their own hands. He emphasized that these "Arabs" would be seeking vengeance, and that they know who is responsible for the torture and murder of their family members.

¶19. (C) Akotey was critical of the new MNJ practice of taking civilian prisoners, but said that the Prefet in Tanout was a special case as he was particularly nasty. The raid on Tanout was not a difficult feat, and could easily be repeated elsewhere. He said that the civilians recently taken hostage by the MNJ near Arlit involved an old traditional feud among Tuareg tribes because the village in question was giving all the jobs with mining companies to its own tribe. Now, the MNJ was in position to do something about this.

10 (C) The GON use of attack helicopters and heavier arms would achieve nothing. It would only make things worse and maybe move the conflict beyond the point of no-return. Akotey said that the point of no-return has not yet been reached and peace negotiations could start tomorrow if Tandja

NIAMEY 00000115 002 OF 002

so desired. A military solution is definitely not possible and going for such a solution only lessens chances for a durable peace. He believes all Nigeriens, except for a small minority, are for peace negotiations.

¶11. (C) Akotey said he had not been surprised by the start of the rebellion almost a year ago as there was much disgruntlement among various Tuaregs, but at the onset it only involved a handful of people. By not negotiating early, the GON allowed the MNJ to gain more adherents and for things to spin out of control.

¶12. (C) Akotey lamented that GON media restrictions and human rights abuses by the army were tarnishing Niger,s image. He said it was wrong to lock journalists up and to prohibit journalists from covering the North.

¶13. (C) Bio Note: Akotey is a Tuareg from the Agadez region and a graduate of the Sorbonne. He was the head of the coalition of Tuareg rebel group during the rebellion of the early 1990s. Before being appointed Minister of Environment and the Fight Against Desertification in June 2007 he was the Agadez based head of the UNDP project supporting the re-integration of former rebels. In that capacity he worked closely with the Embassy's development coordinator. He has been approved by ECA/PE/V/R/A for the FY08 AF regional project on "conflict resolution," June 9-27, 2008.

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